The Labor Movement in the South during Slavery

by HERBERT APTHEKER

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South of slavery times, though conventionally pictured as a placid and untroubled area, actually was marked by intense and multiple social antagonisms. The antagonism between slaves and slaveowners, of course, was basic, but there were several others of great consequence. Among these were the antagonisms between debtors and creditors; landless and landed; artisans, mechanics and industrial workers on the one hand and the owners of ships, railroads, mines, and factories, on the other.

Some work has been done describing and analyzing the raging conflict between slaves and slaveowners, and between non-slaveholding whites (especially rural) and the slaveowners.[1] But very little has been written concerning working-class activity in the South during the existence of slavery.

Long ago, Marx pointed out that, "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic."[2] And while slavery would inhibit working-class organization everywhere in the United States, including those areas where the abomination did not exist, it would have a particularly retarding effect in the South, dominated as that section was by slavery.

Nor is it to be believed that the slaveowners were unaware of this "advantage" of their system. On the contrary, the correspondent for the *London Times* in the South during the Civil War was given to understand that, "The real foundation of slavery in the Southern States lies in the power of obtaining labor at will at a rate which cannot be controlled by any combination of laborers."[3] While wage figures for the South prior to the Civil War are difficult to find and are widely scattered and fragmentary, all the evidence points to the existence of a considerable wage differential, North and South, with rates of pay "lowest in the South," as a government publication put it.[4]

Yet, the fact remains that where capitalism is, there is a working class, and where there is a working class there is organization. Even in the slave South, with a plantation economy characteristic, with one-third of its entire population held as chattel slaves, and with urbanization and industrialization severely retarded—even there a working class appeared, and with it came trade-union organizations, strikes, and political activity.

Fundamentally because of the enslavement of the Negro masses (there were four million slaves in the South in 1860), and all that went with this enslavement, real development of industry was severely impeded. As a result, the growth of a working class was slow, and its organization on the whole rudimentary. Still, some industrial development did occur in the slave South, a working class did appear and, consequently, the struggle between capitalists and workers is a part of the history of that slave South. That struggle, consequential in its day, and harbinger of a decisive component of post-Civil War Southern history, deserves the historian's careful attention.

With rare exceptions, however, historians of the slave South have ignored or have slandered working-class activities. The "standard" work in which one would expect, logically—in terms of the title's promise—to find material on the Southern labor movement in the era of slavery is *Life and Labor in the Old South,* by the late Professor Ulrich B. Phillips, first published in 1929. In this work, however, there is nothing on a labor movement, or trade unions. In other works outright anti-working class prejudices recur, sometimes expressed in almost unbelievably crude language. For example, Professor F. Garvin Davenport's *Ante-Bellum Kentucky: A Social History, 1800-1860* (published in 1943) exhausts the subject of labor in these two sentences:

> Several towns, notably Lexington and Louisville, possessed numerous industries which tended to alleviate the unemployment situation but at the same time attracted many undesirable laborers, including free blacks, who became moral and social problems. Nevertheless, the gains from industry were considered of great importance by the contemporary civic leaders and sometimes morally irresponsible laborers were accepted by the entrepreneurs as a necessary evil (pp. 23-24).

Again, Professor E. Merton Coulter, in his *The Confederate States of America, 1861-65* (published in 1950), writes: "Labor organizations and strikes were 'Yankee innovations' and 'abominations' and were practically unknown to the South. . . ." (p. 236).

Other works, not the products of Bourbon pens, normally reflect no improvement in this regard. Thus, the ten-volume *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (1910), edited by John R. Commons and associates, contains very few and very brief references to Southern labor activity. The first two volumes of *The History of Labor in the United States,* also by Commons and associates (1918), covers the period from the colonial era to 1896, but this was based almost entirely upon Northern and Western sources.

A government publication, *Strikes in the United States,* by Florence Peterson (1938) devotes a chapter to the "Early History of Strikes," but the South, except for reference to Baltimore, is not mentioned. The same omission characterizes Selig Perlman's *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (1922); Norman J. Ware's *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895* (1929); and Foster R. Dulles' *Labor in America* (1949).

Philip S. Foner, in his *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (Vol. I, 1947), brings forth significant material, especially on the relation of the labor movement in the South to slavery. However, there is still a paucity of work in this area.

In the pages that follow, an attempt is made to record something of the history of the labor movement in the South prior to the abolition of slavery. It is hoped that the effort will not be altogether unworthy of its subject, and that it may serve to stimulate further study of this neglected field.

Industry in the Slave South

It is necessary first to dispel the illusion that the South of slavery times was an area containing nothing but plantations and farms, an area devoid of cities and of industry. It is, of course, true that the nation as a whole up to the Civil War was predominantly rural—only twenty percent of the population in the United States lived in cities in 1860. And it is also true that the South was very much behind the North (especially after 1840) in the development of industry and marine and land transportation, but it is equally true that the South was far from having no such developments.

In 1860 there were over 110,000 workers employed in 20,000 manufacturing establishments in the South—about ten percent of the national total. The factories represented a capital investment of $96 million, which may be compared with the quarter of a billion invested in manufacturing establishments at that time in New England.[5] As one would expect under such circumstances, railroad building was concentrated outside the slave area, but there was some in the South. In 1860, national railroad mileage totaled 30,636, of which almost 11,000 was in the South.[6]

The population density of the South was very much lower than that of the North—in the pre-Civil War decade Virginia had a population density of 14 per square mile as compared with 127 per square mile

in Massachusetts—but still there were cities in the South and some of them were quite large. Indeed, of the dozen most populous American cities in 1860, four were in the slave area—Baltimore, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Louisville—and these ranked third, fifth, seventh and eleventh, respectively, Louisville having 68,000 inhabitants and Baltimore 212,000. Other Southern cities, like Charleston, Richmond, Mobile and Norfolk, had considerable populations for their day with a high concentration of working people.*

The leading industries in the slave South were flour, lumber, and tobacco. Of consequence, too, were the textile, iron, leather, and turpentine industries. Mining of gold and coal, the manufacturing of hemp and the production of cotton-gins likewise were of some importance in the South. The skills and tasks connected with the shipping of goods in such ocean and river ports as New Orleans, Mobile, Wilmington, and Memphis also required thousands of working people.

The data show the industrial development of the slave South, then, to have been on a quite rudimentary level, with processing plants and transportation the major areas of employment of the nascent working class. This backwardness was due, of course, to the overwhelmingly slave-plantation economy of the South.

Nevertheless, we do find in this predominantly agrarian slave South, quite a few cities, some industry, a fairly well-developed transportation system, and the existence of a significant class of workers in factories, aboard ships, at ports, on railroads and canals, and as mechanics, artisans, and unskilled laborers. Many of these workers and artisans were slaves—owned or hired by their employers—and many were free workers (including free Negroes). In addition, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many workers were in a stage between chattel enslavement and wage employment, *i.e.,* they were indentured servants, laboring, without pay, for a limited number of years.

The slaves, both the minority in the cities and the majority on the plantations, struggled fiercely for freedom, in ways ranging from individual flight to collective uprising.[7] Great militancy, also, characterized the behavior of the indentured servants, Negro and white, of the South.[8]

* Though very common, it is incorrect to treat these Southern cities as nothing more than appendages of the plantation system, as does, for example, Louis M. Hacker in *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (New York, 1940, p. 291). Thus, as an instance, only two Southern cities—Savannah, Ga., and Newport, Ky.—gave Breckinridge, slavocracy's presidential candidate, over half their vote in 1860. See the essay by A. Crenshaw in E. F. Goldman, ed., *Historiography and Urbanization* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 44-66.

And the free Southern urban worker organized and struggled, economically and politically, to improve his conditions. He did this gropingly, on the whole, and he was beset by serious confusions and limitations, but that he did it at all, in the face of the existence of slavery, attests to his courage, to the inexorable quality of working-class organization and to the irreconcilable nature of class conflict between worker and capitalist.

2. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Collective activity and struggle on the part of working people in the United States dates back to the eighteenth century, and some of these pioneer strivings occurred in the South.

A generation prior to the Revolution, skilled Southern workers in several cities protested the competitive use of slaves and demanded that this cease, a recurrent theme in Southern labor history.[9] During this period there is record of at least one case of collective effort on the part of workers to raise their pay. This involved free Negro chimney sweepers of Charleston who, in 1763, "had the insolence" as the city's *Gazette* put it, "by a combination amongst themselves, to raise the usual prices, and to refuse doing their work, unless their exorbitant demands are complied with." Such activities, continued the paper, "are evils that require some attention to suppress," but just what was the outcome of this particular effort is not known.[10]

Societies of mechanics, artisans and other workers, that played so important a part in the origins and organizational features of the Revolution itself, existed in the South as well as elsewhere. One such society, the Charles Town Mechanics Society, for example, formed the backbone of the South Carolina "Liberty Party" which, as early as 1766, urged American independence.[11]

The immediate post-Revolutionary period was marked by the formation of numerous workingmen's benevolent societies and the beginning of their transformation into weapons for increasing wages and otherwise improving working conditions, that is, into trade unions. Once again, this movement was by no means confined to the North. On the contrary, the 1780's and 1790's saw bakers, bricklayers, carpenters, and other skilled workers actively campaigning, in collective fashion, for increased pay in Virginia and the Carolinas. Such groups and such efforts faced, in addition to employer resistance, legal prosecution, as when, in 1783, the car-

penters and bricklayers of Charleston were charged with conspiracy because they had combined for the purpose of raising their wages. Bakers of Charleston struck in 1786, while that city's famous Mechanics' Society demanded higher pay in 1794.[12]

At about the same time a Society of Journeymen Tailors was formed in Baltimore, and there is record of a strike conducted by it at least as early as 1795. The central issue was the rate of wages, and in this case an increase was won. Seamen in Baltimore also succeeded in winning a pay raise, by a strike, in 1795.[13]

3. THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Early Craft Unions

Nationally, the firm beginnings of an organized labor movement date from the nineteenth century, and this is as true of the South as of the rest of the nation. Leading in this development were the workers of Baltimore—third most populous city in the country prior to the Civil War and while a border city rather than characteristically Southern, still one in which slavery was significant. The printers of Baltimore were organized by 1803, while its tailors conducted successful strikes for higher wages in 1805, 1807, and 1808. The cordwainers (shoemakers) were also quite active during these years and attempted by a strike, in 1809, to obtain a closed shop. The effort failed, and thirty-nine of their leaders were arrested and tried for conspiracy. The records in these cases are poorly preserved, but it appears that one of the workers was found guilty, while the others were acquitted. Seamen successfully struck for higher pay in Baltimore in 1805 and 1807.[14]

Other bits of evidence demonstrate the existence of similar trends at this time elsewhere in the South. Thus, it is clear that a Mechanics' Society was formed in 1806 in New Orleans and the same city witnessed, four years later, the establishment of a typographical workers' union. Again, Charleston carpenters were organized by 1809, and in 1811 there existed a journeymen cordwainers' union in Lexington, Kentucky.[15]

The Second War for Independence waged against England, 1812-15, and the policies and legislation associated with that War, produced a considerable spurt in industrialization. This process continued in the postwar years and helped stimulate mass political activity. It helped lay the

groundwork, too, for an aroused labor consciousness in the twenties and thirties. This development did not skip the South.

Indicative is the fact that labor newspapers, which now made their initial appearance, were published in the South as well as elsewhere. First among them was the *Southern Free Press* issued in Charleston in 1825. Within the next decade labor papers appeared in Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, Virginia, Alabama, and Louisiana.[16]

Labor organization went ahead. Charleston clerical workers had formed their own society by 1825. Four years later some 250 Baltimore weavers struck against wage reductions. Their leaders were arrested and tried for conspiracy, but they won an acquittal.[17] Trade unions were, in fact, common in the South by the 1830's. Before the end of the decade, the printers of Columbia, Charleston, Augusta, Louisville, St. Louis, Richmond, Nashville, Natchez, Jacksonville, and Tallahassee were organized. Strikes for higher wages were conducted at this time by these workers in Richmond, Louisville, and New Orleans.[18]

In the early thirties there were at least seven trade unions in Louisville and an even greater number in Baltimore. In the latter city a strike of journeymen hatters against a wage reduction led, in 1833, to a widespread sympathetic strike. This, in turn, precipitated the formation of a Union Trade Society having seventeen associated unions—one of the first central trades unions in the United States. This organization was among the pioneers in the demand for the ten-hour day, central to the entire labor movement at the time, and also in making common cause with women workers, for a union of women needleworkers joined the Union Trade Society in 1834. Earlier, in October 1833, these women, organized in the Female Union Society of Tailoresses and Seamstresses, had struck for higher wages, supported by the Journeymen Tailors.[19]

By this time strong organizations of workers existed in St. Louis. Among those having trade unions were the printers, carpenters, plasterers, joiners, cabinet makers, tinners, and barbers. St. Louis cabinet makers struck in 1837, without success, for a raise, but the same year the plasterers, led by Henry B. Miller, won their demand for $2.50 per day.

The workers of St. Louis annually took to the streets in massive parades, on July 4th, in which were raised demands for higher wages and, particularly, the ten-hour day. Other major workers' demonstrations occurred in this decade in Southern cities, notably the mass meeting held in the New Orleans public square in 1835 protesting against the use of slave labor. This significant demonstration was dispersed by the State militia at the Governor's order.[20]

It is the thirties, too, which witness the real beginnings of the railroad and canal network binding together the United States. The workers who built these means of transportation under brutal conditions of exploitation (some were slaves), were far from docile, and their militancy was demonstrated in the South, as elsewhere.

One of the first Southern railroads was the Charleston and Hamburg, and its construction workers struck in 1832, only to be crushed by the militia. Again, in 1836, the workers laying the trackage of the Wilmington and Susquehanna struck in Chestertown, Maryland. Before this bid for better working conditions was broken by railroad-hired thugs and militia, five workers were killed and ten wounded.[21]

Strikes and outbreaks, reaching near insurrectionary proportions, marked the building in Maryland of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. From 1834 through 1839, the workers struck repeatedly, despite company spies and armed terror.* Typical was this report in a Baltimore publication of the time (*Niles' Weekly Register,* Feb. 21, 1835):

> There has been another riot on the Chesapeake and Ohio canal. . . . Many laborers, on a certain section, turned-out for higher wages, and would neither work themselves, nor let others work. A troop of horse, and a company of riflemen, with directions to use force to preserve public peace, happily reduced the rioters to order, and drove them away. To refuse such persons employment is the surest way to check a riotous spirit.

This by no means, however, cowed the workers. Sporadic strikes occurred in the following months, to be capped by a great stoppage of work in the summer of 1838. The State militia was ordered out again, but some refused to serve as strikebreakers and a few actually threatened to fight on the side of the workers. In August 1838, an increase in pay was granted, but 130 especially militant workers were fired. A year later another mass strike occurred near Cumberland, Maryland, which was broken by the arrest of thirty leaders and their being sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to eighteen years.[22]

Similarly, hard struggles marked the James River and Kanawha Company's canal building near Richmond in 1838. Here were employed 500 workers, of whom about 150 were slaves, the rest white wage workers. In May and June the hired workers struck, demanding higher wages,

* This included, in 1834, the use of Federal troops—the first time such troops were used as strikebreakers. See: R. B. Morris, in *The American Historical Review,* October, 1949.

but the strike was broken when most of those out were fired and replaced by 300 slaves. There are also somewhat vague evidences of strikes among the workers of the Central Railroad of Georgia in 1841 and the South Carolina Canal and Railroad in 1845.[23]

Ten-Hour Day Movement

Further examples of Southern working-class activity in the forties come from Missouri, Louisiana, and Virginia. Workers in Missouri centered their efforts at this time around the demand for the ten-hour day. More or less sporadic meetings around this theme developed into great labor conventions which, in turn, gave birth to working-class political parties of considerable influence in Missouri during the decade.

Thus, in March 1840, journeymen brickmakers met in St. Louis, pledged to combat vigorously capital's encroachments, "as a duty to ourselves, our families, and our posterity," and announced their adherence to the Ten-Hour System. A labor convention with delegates from twenty-three crafts and occupations* assembled in the same city on July 2, 1840, and resolved to fight for the ten-hour day. From this developed the short-lived, but powerful, Mechanics' and Workingmen's Party of Missouri. Strikes were also resorted to by these workers during this period, the most notable occurring in 1845 when the shipworkers of St. Louis struck for higher wages and won.[24]

In the same decade, in Louisville, Kentucky, the bricklayers organized with the objective of achieving the ten-hour day but, facing the competition of slaves, they failed. So, also—and for the same reason—did the carpenters and painters of that city fail in a strike for a shorter work-day, but the stone-cutters, without slave competition, succeeded in gaining the ten-hour day.[25]

Free and Slave Labor

Mechanics and printers in New Orleans and Baton Rouge participated in active struggles during the forties. Outstanding was the action of Baton Rouge mechanics in leaving their city in protest against the competitive use of convict labor, an action which resulted in the elimination of the grievance in 1845.[26]

* Including boatmen, bookbinders, blacksmiths, bricklayers, cabinet-makers, carpenters, carters, coachmen, drayers, hatters, laborers, lime-burners, machinists, painters, plasterers, saddlers, sheet-metal workers, ship-carpenters, shoemakers, silversmiths, stonemasons, tailors, and tobacco workers.

One of the most important of pre-Civil War strikes occurred in Richmond in 1847. This took place in the South's leading iron mill, the Tredegar Iron Works. The white workers, led by one named Gatewood Talley, demanded a raise in wages and the abandonment of the use of slaves in the plant. The press of the city and the region was particularly vicious in combatting this strike, denouncing it as akin to abolitionism (*i.e.,* in their eyes, treason) and as threatening to "wholly destroy the value of slave property."

The strikers, occupying company-owned houses, were evicted, the leaders arrested, at the Mayor's order, on the charge of conspiracy, and additional slave workers were purchased and hired (that is, rented from their masters). After weeks of resistance, these strike-breaking measures succeeded, and thereafter this iron mill operated, until and through the Civil War, very largely with slave labor. The slaves, themselves, caused keen concern for the boss, especially because of frequent flight.[27]

A somewhat similar event occurred the same year on a Louisiana sugar plantation. A slaveowner replaced his unfree labor force with about one hundred Irish and German immigrants. An English visitor reported the result:

> In the middle of the harvest they all struck for double pay. No others were to be had, and it was impossible to purchase slaves in a few days. In that short time he lost produce to the value of ten thousand dollars.

The planter returned to slave labor.[28]

The Pre-Civil War Decade

Workers were markedly militant during the 1850's in several Southern states. Thus, about 1850, the cotton screwmen* of New Orleans organized the Screwmen's Beneficial Association, and conducted successful strikes for higher wages in 1854 and 1858. By 1860 practically all the workers of that craft in New Orleans were unionized. Seamen and longshoremen in the same city struck repeatedly for better pay in 1851 and 1852. There is evidence also of the existence of Agricultural and Mechanical Societies, as well as Mechanics' Societies in Baton Rouge and New Orleans during the same period, and these represented additional forms of worker organization.[29]

* Workers who, using large jack-screws, packed cotton bales into the holds of ships.

In 1852, the New Orleans Typographical Union was reorganized (under the leadership of Gerard Stith, later Mayor of the city) and greatly strengthened. The next year the members struck against the city's newspapers, and although strikebreakers were imported from New York City, the determination of the local workers remained firm. Their efforts were successful and a raise of 25 percent was won.[30]

In 1857, under the leadership of Richard Trevellick, who had been active in the struggle for an eight-hour day in his native Australia (and was to be a very important post-Civil War labor leader), the ship carpenters and caulkers of New Orleans formed a union. This succeeded in obtaining a nine-hour day for its members. Longshoremen and deckhands, undoubtedly stimulated by all this activity, themselves took the road of organization, also in the fifties. Strikes by these workers occurred frequently and, in 1858 the slave state of Louisiana passed a law prohibiting strikes or work stoppages on ships or at freight wharves.[31] Arrests as a result of this law were common in Louisiana for several years thereafter.*

There is a record of the unionization of carpenters in Hopkinsville, Ashland, and Paducah, Kentucky; and of typographical workers in Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Petersburg, Virginia, in the 1850's.[32] Petersburg was the scene of another example of labor activity in 1854. The owner of a sawmill near that city called for a longer work-day. The workers struck, threatened to ride the boss on a rail, and marched in a protest demonstration to the city. There was no increase in hours.[33]

An inconclusive strike of typographical workers occurred in Charleston, South Carolina in 1853, and in 1857, the workers in William Gregg's loudly-ballyhooed "model" textile mill in Graniteville, of the same state, struck for higher wages. Here, too, the result is not on record.[34]

At the same time iron molders in the South were organizing. Southern locals of the National Molders Union, led by William H. Sylvis—later, founder of the National Labor Union—were formed in the fifties in Richmond, Memphis, St. Louis, Baltimore and Louisville. In several instances, as in St. Louis in 1858 and in Baltimore in 1860, hard-fought strikes were conducted.[35]

Another pioneer national trade union, the American Miners' Association, parent of the U.M.W.A., had some of its roots in a slave state.

* Roger Shugg, in his pioneering work, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1939), wrote: "The free worker in New Orleans was in danger of losing his freedom and being pulled into the orbit of slavery" (p. 117).

Two strikes of miners occurred in the 1850's in the Cumberland coal field in Maryland, where about 350 men worked. In 1850-51, these men struck for six weeks against the bosses' demand for a wage cut and an agreement barring work stoppages. The workers won. In 1854, however, the workers lost in their demand for 40 cents a ton of coal (they accepted 30 cents) after being out fourteen weeks and facing the armed might of the state militia. There is a direct line connecting these militant actions and the formation in 1861 of the American Miners' Association.[36]

The decade of the fifties was marked, too, by several strikes among Southern railroad workers. Notable was the strike in South Carolina, early in 1855, of workers employed by the North Eastern Railroad. The men sought to increase their pay from $1 per day to $1.25, but the State crushed it by arresting twenty-three of the leaders, charging them with "inspiring terror" and seeking "an unlawful end." All were fined and jailed.[37] More successful was the effort of the workers in Memphis employed by the Memphis & Charleston Railroad. In 1860 these workers felt sufficiently well organized to demand a one-hour reduction in their eleven-hour day. After prolonged struggles, marked by large-scale demonstrations and public meetings, the workers won their demand.[38]

4. MARXISM IN THE SOUTH

Marxism appeared in the United States during the decade prior to the Civil War, and its influence was felt in that period in the South as well as the North.* William Z. Foster, in his *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (p. 39) points to the heroic anti-slavery activity of Marxists in the South, such as Adolph Douai in Texas and Hermann Meyer in Alabama. Their activity, however, was not confined to opposition to slavery. They were Marxists and so, while of course fighting against slavery, the central task of the time, they also projected programs and participated in efforts of the working class as such.

There were Marxist groups, overwhelmingly German in composition, in Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Louisiana, and Texas. Out of a total of 600,000 people in Texas in 1860, over 20,000 were Germans, living in the western part of the state and shunning the employment of slave labor. To many of these settlers, and especially to the

* Daniel Bell is wrong—not unusual for him—when he writes that from 1850 to 1860 Marxism appeared only "in the large northern cities." (D. Egbert and S. Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life,* Princeton, 1952, I, p. 231.)

large segment among them who were political refugees from the 1848 revolution, Marxism was more or less familiar.

In the early fifties Marxist clubs and organizations had appeared amongst these German settlers in Texas, and in 1853 Adolph Douai began publishing the *San Antonio Zeitung, ein Sozial-Demokratisches Blatt für die Deutschen in West Texas.** By 1854, the Austin *State Times* (May 19) was delicately hinting: "The contiguity of the San Antonio River to the *Zeitung* office, we think suggests the suppression of that paper. Pitch in."[39]

Two years later—a time of tremendous slave unrest throughout the South—though the press itself was not destroyed, Douai was forced, in peril of his life, to flee the South. It was the whole democratic orientation of his paper, its firm espousal of the abolition of slavery, and its Marxist approach, which produced its forcible suppression by the Texas slaveowners.**

In 1850 a German Workmen's Convention met in Philadelphia. The Marxist influence at this gathering was potent. Its forty-four delegates, each representing 100 workers, discussed trade union and political perspectives. Of the six cities sending delegates, three—St. Louis, Baltimore and Louisville—were in the slave area.[40] The next year a German Social-Democratic Association was founded in Richmond which remained of sufficient consequence, during the fifties, to be denounced intermittently by the local press.[41] Similarly, it is of some interest to note that Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia turned to red-baiting and anti-Semitism in his 1853 campaign, announcing that his opponents were not merely tools of the Abolitionists, but were also "German Jews [and] Red Republicans."[42]

A radical German-language newspaper, showing distinct Marxist influence, *Der Wecker* (*The Awakener*) was established in Baltimore by Carl Heinrich Schnauffer, poet, 1848 revolutionist, and political refugee. This paper called for the organization of trade unions, an eight-hour day, universal suffrage, and the abolition of slavery. After Schnauffer's

* *San Antonio Times,* a Social-Democratic newspaper for the Germans in West Texas.

** Douai came to Philadelphia. That city's Negro community—then the largest in the North—honored him at a public rally, and helped raise funds so that he might publish a newspaper in Philadelphia. In 1868, Negroes in Texas published a paper using Douai's *Zeitung* press. They sent him a copy of the first number "as a token of gratitude of the colored race that they preserve the memory of his efforts for their freedom." (Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the U.S.,* New York, 1903, p. 191; P. S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the U.S.,* New York, 1947, p. 264*n.*)

death in 1854, his wife edited the paper for three years, when Wilhelm Rapp, another '48er, and president of Baltimore's *Turnerbund,* became editor. He continued its politically advanced policies, and supported Lincoln in the election of 1860. In April 1861, a mob drove Rapp out of Baltimore, but Mrs. Schnauffer heroically and successfully defended the press, and continued the paper's publication.[43]

A newspaper of similar character was founded by another '48er in Louisville in 1854. The *Herold des Westens,* edited by Karl Heinzen (an early associate of Marx who later turned against Marxism), denounced slavery, called for "the protection of the laboring classes from the capitalists" and advocated universal suffrage, including the enfranchisement of women. It demanded the enactment of minimum wage and maximum hour laws, and the granting, without charge, of public lands to bonafide settlers. A like-inclined newspaper, the *Deutsche Zeitung,* appeared about this time in New Orleans[44] and boldly supported "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Men, and Fremont" [the Republican Presidential candidate] in the election of 1856.

The program of the Richmond Social-Democratic Association, as put forth in 1854, survives and no doubt epitomizes the program of Marxist, and near-Marxist, Southern groups prior to the Civil War. This Association demanded the emancipation of the slaves, the wide dispersal of land ownership, the nationalization of the railroads, "the amelioration of the condition of the working class," by providing an eight-hour day for adults and a five-hour day for children, by the development of trade unions and workingmen's societies, by a mechanics' lien law, free public education, abolition of imprisonment for debt, and a revision of the system of taxation so that it would be based on the capacity to pay. It advocated the popular election of all office-holders by universal suffrage, with the power of recall vested in the electorate.[45]

5. LABOR AND SLAVERY

Of course, the labor movement in the South was still in its elementary stages and is not to be thought of as offering anything like decisive weight in the whole Southern struggle against the Bourbon oligarchy. This struggle was waged in the main by the Negro masses and by the non-slaveholding whites who made their bare and precarious living by tilling the soil.

However, among these non-slaveholding whites of country and city, racism was rampant. It was the single most important ideological instrument the Bourbons had for the maintenance of their system. This helped make impossible any fully effective struggle against the ruling class on the part of its victims. It prevented the non-slaveholding whites, in factory or farm, from developing a policy and a program in cooperation with the Negro people that might result in actually defeating the slaveowners.

Yet, the marked militancy of Southern wage workers in the 1850's is part of the whole pattern of increased opposition to slavocratic domination which is so significant a component of Southern history in the pre-Civil War decade. Other aspects of this developing threat to Bourbon power in terms of rising slave disaffection, numerous instances of Negro-white unity in slave plots and uprisings, and the economic and political opposition of non-slaveholding whites (urban and rural) to the planters' dictatorship, together with the reasons therefore, have been examined elsewhere.[46]

These threats the Bourbons met with increasingly harsh repression, and they followed the same course in meeting the appearance and development of working-class organization and activity. In a slave society, labor was considered loathesome, and the ruling class of the American slave society detested and feared working people. "Free society!" exclaimed a Georgia newspaper in 1856, "we sicken at the name. What is it but a conglomeration of greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, small-fisted farmers, and moon-struck theorists?" Merchants and capitalists, said a South Carolina newspaper during the same period, were not unduly hostile to a slaveholding society, "but the mechanics, most of them, are pests to society, dangerous among the slave population, and ever ready to form combinations against the interest of the slaveholder, against the laws of the country, and against the peace of the Commonwealth."[47]

More and more, in law and in theory and in fact, the rulers of the slave South tried to eliminate the distinction between chattel slavery and wage labor. As we have seen, this led a careful historian of the question in one state (Roger Shugg's study of Louisiana) to write that, in the fifties, the free worker was being pulled more and more "into the orbit of slavery." Long before, contemporaneously, indeed, Karl Marx had stated:

> Between 1856 and 1860 the political spokesmen, jurists, moralists and theologians of the slaveholders' party had already sought to prove not so much that

Negro slavery is justified, but rather that color is a matter of indifference, and the working class is everywhere born to slavery.[48]

The facts concerning the organizational efforts of Southern free workers, and the bitter resistance to these efforts by the Southern rulers, give added substance to Marx' fundamental evaluation of the Civil War:[49]

The present struggle between the South and the North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the systems of slavery and the system of free labor.

Southern Opposition to Slavery

The Southern masses, Negro and white, hated the Bourbons. This hatred intensified as the slave system aged and became increasingly oligarchic and tyrannical. It is, in part, this increasing disaffection of the home population which drove the slaveowning class to the desperate expedient of seeking, forcibly, to overthrow the government of the United States—to defy the election results of 1860 and to retain their paramount power, in the South at least, by armed secession.

Just as fear and hatred of the masses in the South was consequential in moving the slaveholders to undertake their armed counter-revolutionary attempt, so the masses' hatred for those slaveholders was of great consequence in helping to defeat that attempt. Secession was accomplished against the will of the vast majority of Southern people, and the collapse of the Confederacy was due not only to the pounding of the Union forces (in which, by the way, served scores of thousands of Southerners, Negro and white), and to the superiority of the Union's industrial might and population potential. That collapse, complete as it was, cannot be understood if one does not understand that the Confederacy never had the devotion of the majority of Southerners. The Negro masses, 35 percent of the South's total population, detested the Confederacy as the instrument of their enslavers, and their activity in opposition to that government and in support of Lincoln's was of fundamental importance in the Confederacy's defeat.

Moreover, most of the Southern white masses opposed the Confederacy and this, too, was fundamental in explaining its collapse. Over 110,000 soldiers deserted the Confederate army, many taking their guns with them. Most of these men successfully resisted recapture because of the people's sympathy and assistance, and many in organized detachments offered battle to regular units of the Confederate army. Major cities

were besieged by these Southern opponents of the Davis government, and other areas of the South, particularly in the mountain districts, never were won over to secession. Other forms of disaffection among the white masses had devastating effects upon the strength and stability of the Davis regime. These included, most notably, the so-called "Bread Riots," led by impoverished working women, as in Virginia, North Carolina and Alabama. Here hundreds, and, at times, thousands of women (and, seeing their example, some men) gathered together and marched, armed with clubs, etc., upon stores and helped themselves to food for their starving families. In other cases army commissary supplies, and even army supplies in transit, were forcibly taken by Southern women facing destitution in the "rich man's war and the poor man's fight" that the slaveowners had launched.

Of great consequence, too, were the numerous Peace, and Union Societies which sprang up by the hundreds throughout the South. These became more and more numerous as the slaughter continued. Their political influence in large areas of the Confederacy was potent and continued to mount throughout the war.[50] It was the poor, in countryside and city, who formed the mass base of these groups.

Part of this larger story is the fact that the trade-union and organizational stirrings of Southern workers, which, as we have seen, were present in the pre-Civil War generation and reached a high point in the fifties, continued during the Civil War itself. We turn, then, to a consideration of Southern labor activity during the war years.

6. THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD

The necessities of fighting led to the development of industrialization in the South during the War. As a result, additional thousands of workers, including many women, appeared. These workers, plagued by an inflation which far outstripped occasional and tiny wage increases, often turned to organization and sometimes to strikes in order to force some improvements in starvation conditions. While this militancy appears, the presence of slavery—during the war years, as before—prevented the workers from really breaking through and achieving thorough organization or substantial gains.

The workers could and did withstand court processes, frame-ups, violence and even impressment into the Army—all these methods were used by the bosses to break up the workers' organizational efforts. But the

workers could not overcome the bosses' prime weapon, slavery. The impressment of slaves into ordnance works, railroads (slaves were used in all positions, including those of brakemen and firemen), maritime, and some factory work could, and did, vanquish war-time struggles of the free workers. Never more vividly than during the Civil War, in the South, was confirmed the truth of Marx' statement: "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black skin it is branded."

The reports of Southern strikes during the Civil War are exceedingly fragmentary, and undoubtedly many went completely unrecorded. Still enough is at hand to show that wage workers of the South struggled militantly during the War to better their conditions.

During the first year of the fighting, workers in the Confederacy's largest iron works—the Tredegar plant in Richmond—struck for higher wages, but the outcome of this struggle is not known. In 1862 several strikes were reported in Secessia's capital city, including among harness workers, lithographers, typographers and cemetery workers. The cemetery workers were fired and replaced by slaves; the lithographers and typographers saw their leaders arrested and jailed for "conspiracy" and this broke their effort; the outcome in the case of the harness workers is not known. Machinists in the shops of the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad in Lynchburg also went on strike in 1862. Their strike was broken when the Confederacy conscripted the strikers into the army.

Conscription also broke a strike of the workers in the Richmond armory in 1863, while the outcome of a strike of shoemakers in that city the same year is unknown. One of the few successful strikes during the War was carried out in 1863 in Richmond, by women workers employed in the Confederate States Laboratory. These workers won a wage increase, but when they struck again in 1864, all were fired. A strike for higher pay by the Confederate postal clerks was partially successful, some increase being obtained.[51]

Machinists, smiths, and other workers at the armory in Macon, Georgia, and at the Shelby Iron Company in Columbiana, Georgia, went on strike in 1863 for a wage increase. In both cases the outcome is uncertain. In March 1864, the chief of the Macon armory informed General Josiah Gorgas, over-all commander of Confederate ordnance, that the workers "generally [were] so much dissatisfied with the wages allowed them that it is impossible to get them to apply themselves to their work in anything like a satisfactory manner." By May 1864, the wage workers in this Macon armory were again ready to strike and now the situation was met by replacing all of them with requisitioned slave

laborers.[52] During the same period workers struck at the Naval Ordnance Works in Atlanta. They demanded higher pay, but, once again, the outcome is not clear from available records.[53]

One of the most extensive and best organized strikes among Southern workers in the Confederacy involved telegraph operators, civil and military. These workers announced in October 1863, the formation of a Confederate-wide Southern Telegraphic Association, the leading officers of which were Charles A. Gaston of Mobile, J. S. Clarke of Charleston, C. F. Barnes of Augusta, and W. H. Clarke of Savannah.

The telegraph operators worked six days a week from 7 in the morning to 10 in the evening, and put in four hours on Sunday—*i.e.,* a 94-hour week! They declared, when announcing the existence of their Association, that, "Our rights have not been respected by the various telegraph companies, and they have recently used the conscript law of the Confederate States as a means to intimidate us to succumb to demands we consider unfair and tyrannical." The bosses remained adamant and telegraph operators throughout the Confederacy struck in January 1864 for a closed shop, higher pay, and a shorter work-day.

The slavocrat press denounced the workers as conspirators and traitors and urged that all of them be drafted and then, in uniform, returned to their jobs.[54] Exactly this was done, after the men had held firm for a month. They were conscripted and forced to work at pay that equalled seventeen (Confederate) dollars a month![55]

The last session of the Confederate Congress had under consideration several bills which outlawed entirely strikes and trade unions, or any kind of collective activity on the part of wage workers. There is no doubt that had the war continued another year such legislation would have been passed by the Davis regime, enemy that that regime was to human freedom in general.

7. CONCLUSION

Hitherto it has been generally held that the labor movement by-passed the slave South. It is certainly true that the slave South was overwhelmingly agrarian and this itself limited the possibility of a major labor movement. It is also true that the existence of slavery militated against the development of a numerous working class in the cities, and in any case against the development of a large-scale, effective labor organization. In this sense, a basic lesson of the history of the labor movement in the slave South is the catastrophic cost to the white working population in

particular, as well as to the South as a whole, of the enslavement of the Negro people.

Nevertheless, to see the picture in its entirety, it is important to understand that cities and ports, railroads and canals, factories and mines did exist in the slave South, and that these were made useful and productive, there as everywhere, by working men and women, among whom were wage workers as well as slaves. These free workers, facing the exploitation of their bosses, did organize to oppose or to limit their exploitation.

In the slave South trade unions were formed, strikes were conducted, a labor press and labor parties were brought into being. In the slave South Marxists, and bourgeois-democratic revolutionaries (many of them very much influenced by Marxism) lived and worked. Marxism helped plant the seed of class consciousness, independent political action and Negro-white unity in the pre-Civil War South.

This working-class movement is part of the opposition to slavocrat domination which is so decisive a part of Southern history. Its upsurge in the 1850's is part, too, of the rising threat to Bourbon power which characterizes the pre-Civil War decade and strongly affected ruling-class policy. And labor unrest and militancy are facets of the mass opposition within the South, to the slaveholders' Confederate government, an opposition of fundamental consequence in causing that Government's collapse.

Finally, the history of labor struggles in the slave South is a precious part of the entire and continuing effort of the American working class to fully and effectively organize itself. It is part of the not-to-be-denied struggle of the American working class, the Negro people, the farming, and toiling masses generally, to produce a United States of equality, security, democracy, and peace for all.

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